DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 044 CG 030 015

TITLE	Building Safe and Strong Communities through Collaboration.
INSTITUTION	National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (DHHS/ACF), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Abuse; *Child Neglect; *Cooperation; Evaluation; Objectives; Prevention; Program Implementation; *Public Agencies; Strategic Planning

ABSTRACT

Much-needed initiatives to treat the immediate and long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect are costly. To address steadily growing needs cost-effectively, federal programs increasingly require community agencies to collaborate in providing services to children, youth, and families. Moreover, policymakers increasingly aim to capture the social and economic benefits of preventing abuse and neglect by supporting programs designed to strengthen families and communities. Many agencies and organizations have responded to community needs and funding requirements by forming partnerships and coalitions to coordinate service delivery. Building a viable partnership requires long-term planning and a clear vision of what promoting shared goals can mean to community agencies, organizations, and residents. Initial hesitancies can be overcome through diligence and delivery of a consistent, positive message about what the prevention partnership can accomplish for the total community. Child abuse and neglect prevention programs are in a perfect position to reach out to other organizations, agencies, and community members in collaborative ventures. The key element of successful collaborations is building trust and inclusiveness. The most important tasks for these partnerships are: community assessment, goal setting, strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation. (Contains 13 references.) (MKA)

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Building Safe and Strong Communities Through Collaboration

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Much-needed initiatives to treat the immediate and long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect are costly. To address steadily growing needs cost-effectively, Federal programs increasingly require community agencies to collaborate in providing services to children, youth, and families. Moreover, policy makers increasingly aim to capture the social and economic benefits of preventing abuse and neglect by supporting programs designed to strengthen families and communities.

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Many agencies and organizations have responded to community needs and funding requirements by forming partnerships and coalitions to coordinate service delivery. These collaborations pursue a common goal—to use available resources more efficiently by eliminating service fragmentation and duplication. Moreover, collaboration can improve service delivery by enhancing communication among agencies about issues affecting clients and providers.

Building a viable partnership requires long-term planning and a clear vision of what promoting shared goals can mean to community agencies, organizations, and residents. To some community groups, the idea of a long-term collaboration may imply that they will receive less of already scarce resources. Crisis-oriented organizations may need to be convinced that they have a role to play in a partnership aimed at prevention. Community members who do not have an agency or organization affiliation, but whose opinions and ideas are crucial nonetheless, may have to overcome some initial hesitancy about joining in to what may appear to be yet another inadequate effort. As Bruner (1991) observes, "The goal of collaboration is much greater than simply changing the processes by which services are provided. Its ultimate aim must be to successfully address family or societal problems that are unlikely to be effectively managed by persons or agencies working separately."

These initial hesitancies can be overcome through diligence and delivery of a consistent, positive message about what the prevention partnership can accomplish for the total community. The message should focus on the community's strengths and the desire to build on those strengths to ensure stronger families and a safer environment for children. Partnership members should believe that together they can accomplish much more for the community than an organization or agency can accomplish alone.

INSIDE...

- ✓ Deciding to Collaborate
- ✓ Key Elements of Successful Collaborations
- ✓ Community Assessment
- ✓ Goal Setting
- ✓ Strategic Planning
- ✓ Implementation
- ✓ Evaluation
- ✓ Institutionalization
- ✓ Prevention Through Collaboration: A Look Ahead

DECIDING TO COLLABORATE

Child abuse and neglect prevention programs are in a perfect position to reach out to other organizations, agencies, and community members in collaborative ventures. Child abuse and neglect are not isolated family problems; they are community problems. Schools, churches, health care facilities, and businesses are all affected by the physical and emotional damage done to the community's future—its children. It is in the community's interest to promote strong

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families and safe children because the repercussions of child abuse and neglect are so profound and far reaching. Studies show that physical and emotional abuse and neglect can lead to many additional problems for children, including juvenile crime, behavioral and learning difficulties in school, psychiatric illnesses, and a greater probability of violent behavior toward family members as an adult. Because the effects of child abuse and neglect reverberate through all community institutions—schools, health and human services agencies, law enforcement, the business sector, and faith communities—prevention partnerships can serve as a catalyst for examining the community's response to a number of issues that affect children and families. The child abuse and neglect prevention partnership can lead the way to a comprehensive look at community assets and the development of strategies for community development.

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Successful partnerships, like any worthwhile endeavor, take time, energy, and planning. Before you approach potential partners, think carefully about what your organization brings to the collaborative and what you hope to achieve. Consider the following questions as you plan your collaborative effort:

- Is your organization meeting its goals regarding child abuse prevention?
- Could a collaborative effort expand or enhance your prevention activities?
- Do other organizations in your community provide similar services or target similar audiences?
- Could another organization help your group gain access to community leaders, target audiences, funding sources, or other resources?
- Are your organization's environment, leadership, and staff open to sharing information and resources with potential partners.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS

Successful collaboratives forge strong relationships and a sense of inclusion among members. Often agencies and organizations have not worked as closely together as the partnership requires. In the early stages of partnership development, members learn about each other and their respective organizations and move beyond preconceived notions of how a particular profession or organization operates. Developing trust and a shared vision takes time. Partners must share their fears and expectations and disclose their needs and feelings of mistrust. Out of this dialogue should come a recognition of the strengths that each partner brings to the collaboration and a commitment to cultivate those strengths. There must be a genuine flow of information to enable partners to learn the value of each other's unique perspectives and knowledge (Fantuzzo et al., 1998). Partnership members should strive to develop an organizational structure, a meeting format, and an approach to decision making that encourage the participation of all partnership members.

Efforts should be made to recruit nontraditional partners such as members of the faith community, and representatives of the media, arts and humanities organizations, and community businesses.

The prevention partnership provides an opportunity for the participation of all agencies and organizations with a vested interest in strengthening families and the community. These stakeholders include schools, health agencies, social services agencies, law enforcement, and local government. Community members with no direct agency or organizational affiliation should also be viewed as stakeholders and an integral part of the partnership. Efforts should be made to recruit nontraditional partners such as members of the faith community, and representatives of the media, arts and humanities organizations, and community businesses. It is important that the partnership reflect as nearly as possible the racial, ethnic, and cultural makeup of the community it is intended to serve. Although recruitment might be difficult, the rewards are great in terms of legitimacy within the community-at-large. The infusion of new ideas and new ways of looking at things is valuable. From this inclusive approach can come innovative approaches to community issues that a single agency or organization would not have been able to

generate on its own. Inclusiveness acts as a catalyst for innovation by bringing into the partnership a wide range of experiences, ideas, and community awareness.

Partnership members may have to carefully define the boundaries of the community toward which their efforts will be directed. A community may be loosely defined as a group of people residing in a specific geographic area who are bound together by political, economic, and social interests. In urban areas, a community may comprise several city blocks whereas in more rural and sparsely populated areas a community may span several counties. In major metropolitan areas, a more expansive definition of community might include the core city and the far reaching suburbs that surround it. When collaborative efforts are undertaken, however, it is always important to clearly define the target area for partnership activities. Efforts can always begin small and expand gradually to cover more territory as the partnership increases in size and resources. (Mulroy, 1997)

Effective coalitions can:

- ✓ Accomplish through collaboration what single individuals or organizations cannot
- ✓ Prevent duplication of individual or organization intervention efforts, filling gaps in services
- ✓ Enhance the power of advocacy and resource development
- ✓ Create more public recognition and visibility for efforts
- ✓ Provide a more systematic, comprehensive approach to problems
- ✓ Provide more opportunities for new projects.

(Strengthening Homeless Families, 1994)

Along with building trust and inclusiveness, collaboratives have several key tasks to carry out: community assessment, goal setting, strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation.

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

As Kretzmann (1996) writes, "The hard truth is that development must start from within the community and, in most of our urban neighborhoods, there is no other choice. Creative neighbor-hood leaders across the country have begun to recognize this hard truth, and have shifted their practices accordingly. They are discovering that wherever there are effective community development efforts, these efforts are based upon an understanding, or map, of the community's assets, capacities and abilities. For it is clear that even the poorest neighborhood is a place where individuals and organizations represent resources upon which to rebuild. The key to neighborhood regeneration, then, is to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply power and effectiveness . . . ." The extent of community assessment activities will depend on the time, staff, and funding of the partnership. However, it is important that partnership members share knowledge about the community they are serving. This knowledge encompasses more than the focus of a particular agency, organization, or individual. Assessments may be limited to a compilation of demographic data from census records, results of surveys conducted by others, and responses by partnership members to questions about community assets and service needs. Assessments may be expanded to include focus group discussions, town meetings, and telephone or mailed surveys to partnership members and the community-at-large. These assessments are vital to goal setting and planning for prevention activities. They provide a comprehensive set of data which the partnership can use to set realistic goals and objectives and make long-term plans. The assessment provides clarity about service delivery duplication presents opportunities for coordination. The assessment can also reveal how community members view service delivery and what they feel are the community's strengths and weaknesses. Finding ways to enhance existing community strengths and develop new ones is a major component of successful prevention efforts. The assessment can be a major way to focus the partnership on community development as a prevention strategy.

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GOAL SETTING

With the knowledge gained from a community assessment and the shared vision of promoting a strong community, partnership members can set realistic goals targeting children and families. Since the orientation of the partnership is prevention, goals should address those areas will enhance the community's inherent strengths and develop strengths in areas where the assessment has revealed a need.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

If partnership members want to build a collaborative endeavor that lasts, strategic planning is essential. There are some instances where partnerships are formed to handle an immediate crisis and disband when the crisis is over, but a concerted prevention effort targeted toward strengthening the community should be an ongoing and long-lived enterprise. To that end, partnership members must plan for the long term. Strategic planning enables partnership members to conceptualize the partnership's future and what it hopes to accomplish. A good strategic plan takes into account the total environment in which the partnership is operating. The plan makes the best use of the partnership's resources for future activities.

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Essential elements of the strategic plan include:

- An analysis of environmental factors (economic, social, political, legal, and fiscal) that will impact the partnership initiative
- A mission statement outlining the philosophy, values, and purpose of the partnership
- An organizational assessment defining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the overall collaborative effort
- Objectives for measuring success or failure in progressing toward established goals
- An action plan for meeting objectives that defines activities, roles and responsibilities, and timeframes
- An implementation plan listing participants, leadership, funding resources, policies and procedures, and plans for communication, resource sharing, training, and evaluation.

After developing the strategic plan, each partnership member should have a better understanding of the partnership's goals, what it takes to achieve them, and how to tell when goals have been reached. During this planning process, it is especially important that partnership members be able to speak for and commit their organization to the partnership's future direction. As part of the strategic planning process, partnerships members may also choose to develop interagency agreements that specify the time and resources that member agencies and organizations will commit.

IMPLEMENTATION

Armed with the results of its assessment and the trust that has been nurtured by a careful planning process, the partnership can proceed to implement its programmatic activities. These activities may range from developing educational materials that raise public awareness about child development, family support, successful parenting, or other issues to establishing new facilities or programs. New facilities and programs might include family centers; recreational opportunities for children and youth; home visiting programs; parenting education programs; and adult-to-adult, adult-to-child, and adolescent-to-child mentoring programs. In addition, the community must always have the assurance that there will be appropriate intervention in crisis situations.

EVALUATION

The evaluation process provides an opportunity for the partnership to understand its efforts, modify procedures as necessary, and celebrate its successes. Evaluation provides answers to the questions, "What did we do?" "What effect did it have?" "How can we do it better in the future?" An integral part of the planning process is planning for evaluation activities. The evaluation can be as simple or complex as partnership resources allow, but no collaborative effort should miss this powerful aid to growth and development. Measurement of the outcome and impact of the partnership's prevention activities can provide feedback that may be useful in modifying the strategic plan or in improving implementation strategies. Feedback on the collaborative process itself as measured by information sharing among

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members, enhanced agency cooperation, and changes in service delivery can serve as incentives for member agencies to stay involved. Evaluation is first and foremost a way to improve the functioning of the partnership, the effectiveness of its activities, and the impact of the collaborative approach on service delivery and community development.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

If a partnership has fostered trust and a shared vision among its members, reduced fragmentation and duplication of services among agencies, implemented effective prevention activities based on sound planning, and garnered the support of community residents, then the collaborative effort has proved itself to be a vital part of community life. For partnerships to be institutionalized, both the members of the collaborative and the larger community must acknowledge the overall benefits to the development of children, families, and the community that have resulted from shared resources. Institutionalization requires a long-term commitment from member agencies. It may also require additional funding to hire a small administrative staff to ensure that the work of the partnership proceeds smoothly. Two important strategies for institutionalizing are formalizing agreements with other collaboration members and getting them to build the concept of collaboration into the operating plans of their own organizations. A key strategy is to include voluntary groups who are well established in the community, assuring an ongoing commitment of people and resources (Association of Junior Leagues, 1993).

As the partnership grows and assumes a more prominent role in the community, organizational structure becomes important. In a large, formal partnership, a board of directors may be established to determine roles and responsibilities or to monitor the partnership's prevention program, finances, and management procedures. Staffing needs will be determined by the scope of the partnership's activities. At some point, it may be necessary to have a director or coordinator who has decision making power.

PREVENTION THROUGH COLLABORATION: A LOOK AHEAD

Although collaboration is risky and difficult, if there is a shared vision and a commitment to well-defined goals all partners in the effort and the community-at-large can be strengthened. Building strong partnerships requires a commitment so strong that partners are motivated to resolve issues of turf and competition in their desire to join forces and work toward a common goal. Effective partnerships extend the reach, impact, and credibility of child abuse prevention and neglect prevention programs and enhance the chances of success. Collaboration provides opportunities to share human, financial, and informational resources. Well-implemented partnerships benefit communities by building strong relationships among agencies, organizations, and community residents; enhancing service delivery by reducing fragmentation and duplication, and fostering a safer environment for children and their families. There is a growing recognition that more can be accomplished when all segments of the community come together to address community needs and build on community assets.

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